

RACIAL WAR IN THE SOUTH

A Test of the American Character

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ON THE day the Supreme Court declared segregation unconstitutional the Savannah, Georgia, chapter of Rotary was holding a luncheon meeting. Someone brought in a news flash of the Court's decision and read it to the group. There was a burst of applause.

Other newspaper clippings I collected at the time indicated at least a grudging acceptance by many Southerners of the Court's decision when it first was announced. In Greensboro, North Carolina, the school board voted six to one to admit Negroes into white schools. Virginia's state superintendent of public instruction, when asked for comment, replied, "There will be no defiance of the Supreme Court as far as I'm concerned." The first public reaction of Price Daniel, then in the U.S. Senate and now governor of Texas, was: "Let us accept the law and try to live with the gradual changes it must surely bring."

Today, of course, one no longer reads such news reports. The last three years have been marked by a steady hardening of resistance toward desegregation in the "lower South," with a growing succession of incidents of racial violence and protest, of bombings, boycotts, shootings, and even riotings.

If these incidents were occurring in some foreign country, newspapers would be headlining them as evidence of a racial war. Perhaps it is time that the American people faced up to the fact that this is actually what is going on in the United States today: no-

thing less than a small-scale, second civil war.

I use the term "civil war" not because it happens to be a dramatic metaphor, but because it poses a question which many of us would like to avoid, many of us not only in the South but in the rest of the country as well.

The question is: can we take it for granted that progress in desegregation is inevitable?

Most Americans believe it is. They may concede that years will have to elapse before segregation and the prejudices associated with it vanish, but relatively few people really question that in our lifetime we shall see an end to segregation.

Even Negro leaders assume the inevitability of such progress. Last February I delivered a series of lectures on the Negro's political future at Howard University. In preparing these lectures I talked to quite a number of Negro leaders about what was happening in the South. Typical of the responses I got was the remark of one Negro sociologist: "Social change always brings friction and resistance. I'm not worried about the trouble in the South. It is evidence of a breakdown of the old order."

Certainly no one could expect as deep a social and emotional upheaval as desegregation represents to be accepted in the South without considerable opposition and even violence. But is the intensification of the racial conflict in the South over the last three years really the final fury of the storm before the calm?

What evidence I have been able to collect as a reporter indicates that it is not. Since 1950 I have traveled fairly widely in the South, interviewing typical Southerners—farmers, workers, employers, housewives—almost every two years. Each time I

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have gone below the Mason and Dixon's line I have found the racial atmosphere more tense, more hostile, and more intransigent than on the trip before.

In fact, I would say that the nature of Southern resistance has undergone a profound change. Right after the Court's decision, my interviewing left me with the feeling that opposition to desegregation was mainly a rear-guard action. Most Southerners conceded that the Supreme Court's decree would have to be complied with eventually. About all they hoped for from a show of resistance was to slow the implementing of the decision.

But last year, and even more so in recent months, I found a growing belief among Southern political leaders that the Supreme Court could be defied, completely and permanently. The new, emerging strategy in the South is no longer concerned with ways and means to postpone and delay the inevitable course of integration. More and more, Southern opposition to desegregation is coming to reflect the belief that the Supreme Court's edict can be nullified outright.

This change in strategy largely reflects the fact that, so far as the Lower South is concerned, the first battle of the "second civil war" has resulted in an almost complete rout of the pro-integration forces.

IN FRAMING its decision the Supreme Court sought to overthrow the segregation structure through infiltration rather than through a frontal assault. By giving each Federal district court the power to adjust the timing of desegregation to local conditions, the Supreme Court hoped to shatter the solidarity of the South on this issue. Those sections of a state with the fewest Negroes were expected to integrate their schools with least difficulty. The districts with the heaviest proportion of Negro population were expected to take longer in their compliance.

In Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee, and the Border States, this strategy seems to have borne fruit. But in the Lower South it has been defeated completely.

In the latter states the opponents of desegregation have acted to prevent compliance with the Court even by communities which might be ready to do so. Laws have been passed which would cut off state school funds from any community that breaks out of the segregation mold. The school superintendent of Norfolk, Virginia, declared his readiness to abide by the Court's decision. But Norfolk, as well as Arlington, has been prevented from integrating its schools by the sovereign state of Virginia.

At the same time moderate opinion in these states has been virtually silenced. In the early months after the Supreme Court's decision, many Southerners I talked with did not know which way to turn. Few welcomed the verdict; but many shrank from defying so venerable and authoritative an institution as the Supreme Court. Others felt that segregation was fundamentally un-Christian and immoral.

Where these doubts still exist today their expression is limited to the privacy of small groups or one's own conscience. Outwardly, at least, an almost monolithic unity of opposition to desegregation has been imposed in the Lower South. Teachers have been dismissed for expressing as a personal opinion their belief that the Supreme Court's decision was a proper one. The editors who favor gradual desegregation have learned to keep their views to themselves. One Alabama editor, in refusing an invitation to speak, off the record, before a small group that favored desegregation, explained: "I must keep quiet now if I am to be able to exert any influence in the future."

Pressures toward totalitarian conformity must be expected in a society that is at war—and there really is no other accurate description for the South's attitude on this issue. Of the Southerners I interviewed during the last presidential campaign, a handful talked conciliation, but many more muttered ominously: "A war between the whites and blacks is coming sure as you are standing here."

The one phrase I heard more often than any other was, "Why is the North trying

to cram the nigger down our throats?"

If anything, this feeling among white Southerners of being under siege and attack from the outside seems likely to grow stronger in the future. With hardly a voice left in the South to argue audibly for gradual desegregation, the issue is being pictured more and more as an all-or-nothing struggle in which even the smallest compromise cannot be tolerated. The fact that the Supreme Court's decision provided for a slow, evolutionary pace of desegregation has been all but forgotten in the South.

The extremist passions have spread beyond the segregation question alone. The editor of one Southern newspaper recalled how easy it had been for him to raise funds a few years ago to build a Negro YMCA. "I wouldn't get a nickel if I tried to do that now," he remarked.

The full implications of this triumph of racial extremism is not generally appreciated. As we have seen, the dominant trend in the Lower South—and it is a trend still gaining strength—is toward totalitarian conformity, with less and less room left for differences of opinion among individuals. But if individual differences are not to be tolerated, how can there be progress in race relations?

Obviously, public opinion in the South cannot be transformed all at once. If there is to be a change, it can come only through changes in feelings of individuals, of a man here and a woman there, with their influence growing along with their numbers. But it is difficult to see how such a process of individualistic conversion can gain momentum if the possibilities of gradual desegregation are not even to be debated in the South.

And if by some chance a community could be persuaded to the point where it was willing to experiment with integrated schools, it still would be prevented from doing so by the laws now in force in the Southern states.

The same problem arises with the Negro. Many people believe quite strongly that the key to racial advancement lies in the speed and effectiveness with which the Negro edu-

cates himself and becomes economically self-supporting. Certainly during the immediate years of Reconstruction and afterward, the backwardness of the new freedmen was a very real barrier to effective integration. Some of this backwardness still persists.

But what is happening in the South today raises the question whether, even if the Negro succeeds in bettering himself, that will make any difference in the racial attitudes of the dominant white Southerners. Will white Southerners recognize the attainments of the individual Negro and treat him differently from his more backward cousins? And if no such allowance is to be made for individual differences, how is the progress of the Negro to be registered?

RIGHT at this point we come to the essential difference between the North and the South on this whole vexing issue. Many Southerners point to the discriminations that Negroes suffer in the North and demand: "Why don't you Northerners clean up your own backyard before telling us in the South what to do?"

The Negro, of course, suffers harsh discrimination in the North as well as the South. But in the Northern and Western cities the Negro can fight for what he considers to be his rights. That is all-important. Usually as well, he can look to the law and the government for some support in his struggle. He also knows that if he proves himself an exceptional individual his attainments will be recognized.

In other words, the antagonisms and discriminations that the Negro must endure in the North remain primarily a conflict of people against people, of one man's (or group's) prejudices against another's. In the South, however, it is the government against a particular race.

The crucial distinction between the North and the South lies not in the relative degree of discrimination that prevails in each area. The all-important difference lies in the fact that discrimination holds sway in the South *by law*, while in the North it is a conflict of individuals or groups with one another.

Perhaps the real issue in the current racial struggle should be redefined in these terms. What is actually at stake in the "second civil war" is not whether racial prejudices should be uprooted. If segregation by law were dropped in the South, the degree of real change that would take place would be small. In the major cities the overwhelming bulk of Negro children would still go to Jim Crow schools, as they do in Northern cities. In the rural South it is doubtful whether many Negroes would buck the force of community opinion to attend the same schools with white children.

Moreover, what has happened in the North over the last quarter of a century indicates that even if Negroes and white children did sit together in Southern schools, it would produce neither real intimacy nor a social revolution. The power of people to segregate themselves—whether because of racial consciousness, religious belief, or economic standing—should not be underestimated.

What would the collapse of segregation by law in the South do? It would create a situation in which individuals would be left to work out with one another—or refuse to work out—their racial conflicts. The choice the country faces is this: will the racial struggle be one of individuals or of governments, of men against men throughout the entire country, or of the Southerners dug in behind their state governments in pitched battle with the Federal government?

Fundamentally, the issue is a test of our national character. The logic implicit in the Southern position requires the United States to remain two separate nations in its handling of racial problems.

The South, of course, has always stood apart from the rest of the country in its treatment of Negroes. What the South is fighting for today is to remain an independent sovereignty on this issue, with its own government, laws, and police power dedicated to preserving its own racial ideology.

SUCH racial nationalism becomes all the more ominous when one studies the

statistics of the migration of Negroes northward and westward. At least a third of the nation's Negroes already live outside the South and the proportion is mounting steadily. In Los Angeles, where the Negro population has tripled since 1940, it is estimated that every month an average of 1,700 new Negroes arrive from the South. In Detroit the average increase in the Negro population has run around 1,100 a month. In Akron, Ohio, the Negro population has risen from 23,000 in 1930 to an estimated 30,000. In Flint, Michigan, it has risen roughly 40 per cent since the 1940 census, from 14,000 to about 20,000.

If anything, the South is hastening the Negro's departure. When the Great Migration of Negroes northward began during the First World War, all sorts of obstacles were put in the way of Negroes who wanted to leave. In Montgomery, Alabama, for example, jail sentences were handed out to persons found guilty of enticing Negroes to quit the city. Often trains scheduled to leave for the North would be sidetracked and Negroes would be picked up at railroad stations as *vagrants*.

These actions, of course, reflected the feeling that the South needed its Negro labor. It is a revealing measure of how much less dependent on the Negro's labor the South feels today that the Negro is being *encouraged* to move north.

At the turn of the century, when nine-tenths of the nation's Negroes still lived in the South, there might have been a basis for arguing that the Negro problem was a peculiarly Southern one. But as more and more Negroes spread through the country the race issue becomes more and more a national problem, requiring a national solution. This solution should consist in the steady diminution of the disparity of treatment the Negro receives in different parts of the country.

The alternative is an intensification of racial civil war. Extremism tends to feed on itself. In view of the South's reaction to the Supreme Court decision, one can no longer cling to the illusion that the South, if left

to itself, will in time adjust its treatment of the Negro to conform with that of the rest of the country. And yet if measures of compliance are imposed upon the South, its political leaders would seize upon such actions as evidence that "the North is trying to cram the nigger down our throats." The tragic dilemma the country faces is this: the South will not change "if left alone"; and yet if measures of compulsion are used, these very measures are likely to be exploited in the South to strengthen resistance to change.

I doubt, too, if the Deep South's political leaders can rest content with merely holding their own states solid on this issue. Many of these leaders bitterly resent the fact that some Southern states, like Arkansas and Tennessee, have permitted a break on the integration front. The 1958 and 1960 elections in these states are being looked forward to by some Deep South politicians as a means of driving out of office the officials who have permitted desegregation and reversing whatever progress has been made towards integration.

If the gains which have been made in the Upper South and Border States are to be held, they will have to be fought for over and over again.

Nor will this racial civil war remain confined to the Negro issue alone. American politics has always been a struggle of coalitions, with each political faction in constant search for allies among other factions. We must expect the opposed racial groups—both the pro-segregation white Southerners and the Negroes—to be prepared to sacrifice any other consideration of policy in their search for allies who will support their racial position.

In short, if this racial civil war continues, we shall have two rather sizable political elements in the country, driven almost solely by motivations of racial revenge. Such a politics of revenge will weaken us internally in countless ways small and large—at a time when the overshadowing threat of nuclear war requires the greatest degree of unity we can muster.

WHAT should be done in the situation? Obviously, there is no sword which will cut this Gordian knot at a single stroke. Still, we can do something. A rather constructive suggestion was made by one woman in Richmond, Virginia, whom I interviewed during the last campaign.

After the Supreme Court's decision was announced, she felt that "Some kind of committee should have been set up to work out a plan for carrying out the Court's decision over a five- or ten-year period. It was a mistake to just let nature take its course. The other way people would have known what lay ahead and progress might have been made a step at a time."

Perhaps it is too late for such an action. Yet it does seem worth the effort to try and set up a "Racial Peace Commission" to study the whole agonizing problem and to draft the specific terms of peace for settling our racial war.

Such a peace commission might be flouted by the racial extremists. But even if it did no more than present a specific, detailed program for gradual desegregation, the result might be constructive. It would at least dramatize anew that the choice before the South is not an all-or-nothing one, and it might restore a basis on which the possibilities of gradual desegregation could once again be discussed in the South. This last need—to restore some basis on which desegregation can at least be argued publicly—is the most crucial need in the South today. Unless it can be done, no change in the South's attitude can be expected for a full generation and perhaps longer.

Many Southerners may welcome a middle course. I know that many of the Southerners I have interviewed feel that on the racial issue they are being pushed into a black tunnel, a tunnel so dark that they cannot see where they are going or where they will come out. Some of these fears could be removed by lighting the tunnel so it will be clear how far any community must go in any period of time.

Whether or not the creation of a Racial

Peace Commission is the best way of moving, sooner or later we shall have to draft a racial treaty of peace among ourselves—or pay the tragic price in continued civil war.

Finally, however long the struggle rages, let us not deceive ourselves that the next generation will find it easier to come to a decision on this tragic issue. We shall be told that as the nation progresses economically and the educational level is raised, the tensions between whites and blacks will tend to subside and their difficulties will be more easily reconciled. Developments of recent years, however, challenge this easy faith in the automatic workings of progress.

I can remember when I was in college how virtually unchallenged was the belief that the racial problem was “really an economic one.” Racial difficulties would vanish, we were told, if the South overcame its fat-back pellagra diet and if Tobacco Road got paved. Over the last twenty years the South has progressed economically at a more rapid rate than almost anyone hoped for. But racial tensions have mounted, not lessened.

Another oft-voiced hope was that racial attitudes in the South would change as the proportion of Negroes to whites in the population declined. But the referendums which have been held in the South in recent years do not show any less support for segregation in counties whose Negro population has been dropping most heavily than in counties where the proportion has remained unchanged.

CURRENTLY, the Negro leaders and so-called “liberal” elements are placing extravagant hopes on the prospect of an increase in Negro voting in the South. A rapid rise in this vote, so the argument runs, will make race-baiting too dangerous politically. But the harsh fact is that in the thirteen years since the white primary was opened and Southern Negroes began to vote in sizable numbers, liberalism in the South has lost strength steadily and is all but a corpse today.

The belief that became widespread dur-

ing the Senate debate on civil rights—that possession of the right to vote would open the way to the Negro’s gaining his other legitimate rights—is not supported by American history. Voting alone has never made for political power. The rise of other minority elements in the country shows that political effectiveness is a reflection of all the elements of power a group can command, from the education and the leisure to undertake political activity to the economic base necessary to provide funds for candidates of one’s own choosing.

If Southern Negroes attempt to break the segregation structure through use of the ballot, the likelihood is that they will sharpen the lines of racial conflict: they will find themselves standing alone politically, without allies among any group of white Southerners. The Civil Rights bill, for all the importance attached to it, does not even touch the heart of the race problem—how to overcome the tragic fact that we remain two separate nations on this issue.

My argument is, of course, not aimed against efforts to expand Negro suffrage or encourage Negro economic progress, but against a belief in progress or in the right to vote that serves to distract or excuse us from coming to grips with the real problem.

What has happened in this country since 1954 indicates that the race issue is not a problem of progress but of national moral character. It is not a question of waiting until the “proper” social and economic conditions are brought into existence. It is a problem of whether we will do what we know to be the right thing to do.

Repeatedly in our history the racial issue has arisen to test our national character. If today, in a nuclear age, we remain two nations on this problem, it is largely because in the past we met the issue in much the same way—by waiting for the “right conditions” and the “right time” before acting. The right time for a moral decision is always the present. No more than riches make for virtue in the individual, does progress make for character in nations.